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CIA-04 Marchetti, Victor
SOC. U. 01.2 The Rope Dancer

Former CIA Man's 'Impression' of Spy Business

THE ROPE-DANCER. By Victor Marchetti. Grosset & Dunlap. 361 pages. \$6.95.

To my knowledge this is the first time a spy novel has been openly authored by a former high official of the Central Intelligence Agency. Until his resignation in 1969, Marchetti had held the post, among others, of special assistant to the executive director of the CIA. Appropriately enough his protagonist, "Paul Franklin," is special assistant to the deputy director of the "National Intelligence Agency" during the Johnson administration.

The two-plot concerns the gradual corruption of Franklin's character and the efforts of the security branch of the agency to ferret out a top-level Soviet penetration thereof.

In view of Marchetti's background, the reader has a right to hope for a few innocuous but savory tidbits about life in that squat pile out at Langley. And he gets a few, such as the procedure for operating the push buttons leading into the restricted areas or the hairline of superiority a certain title bestows upon otherwise equally paid GS-18s.

And the author's narrative moves, always an element worth praising. (There is no sex to speak of, an element worth noting.)

But such crumbs are about all that is fresh to emerge from a very knowledgeable source. The rest of the story is right in the old groove. Except for his hero, none of Marchetti's characters is developed. "Franklin" goes through the standard stages of abasement before bottoming out at treason, and his motivation is vanity; because he is an ethnic from the Pennsylvania coal fields (his father changed names) who got to Princeton only on a football scholarship, envy of more cultured colleagues

has festered in his soul.

Those colleagues, paraded as a spectrum of the agency's controlling clique, are delineated instead of portrayed, and the master delineation is professional jealousy of one another.

Are all decisions of international import really settled over martini lunches in the District's bistros? Is all conversation in the intelligence community lathered with four letter words? Does the director -- an inscutable oligarch--really tell the President of the United States only what he thinks the President wants to hear? Are all Army generals assigned to the agency (in this case the deputy director) wise, sturdy old soldiers whose concerned flag-waving is held at half staff by the buffetings of bureaucracy?

It may all be so. If it is so, this country had better throw in the towel. But the point is, Marchetti's presentation of all this does not persuade. His dialogue does not ring true, nor do the people who mouth it.

Granted, any alumnus of a sensitive government headquarters had a gag on him to begin with vis-a-vis fiction. But he must learn to manipulate the gag.

Such an author has no need to suggest that he may be hinting at state secrets in order to tell a good story. What is needed is to tell that story so convincingly that a reader will be caught up in the notion that state secrets are in fact being revealed.

In the foreword we are assured that this novel "is not a portrait of the intelligence profession . . . It is rather an impression of that mysterious craft, born of the author's own imagination and fed by his desire to entertain and create." "The Rope-Dancer" is not entertaining. Let us hope that, next time round, Marchetti will get on with the creative aspect.